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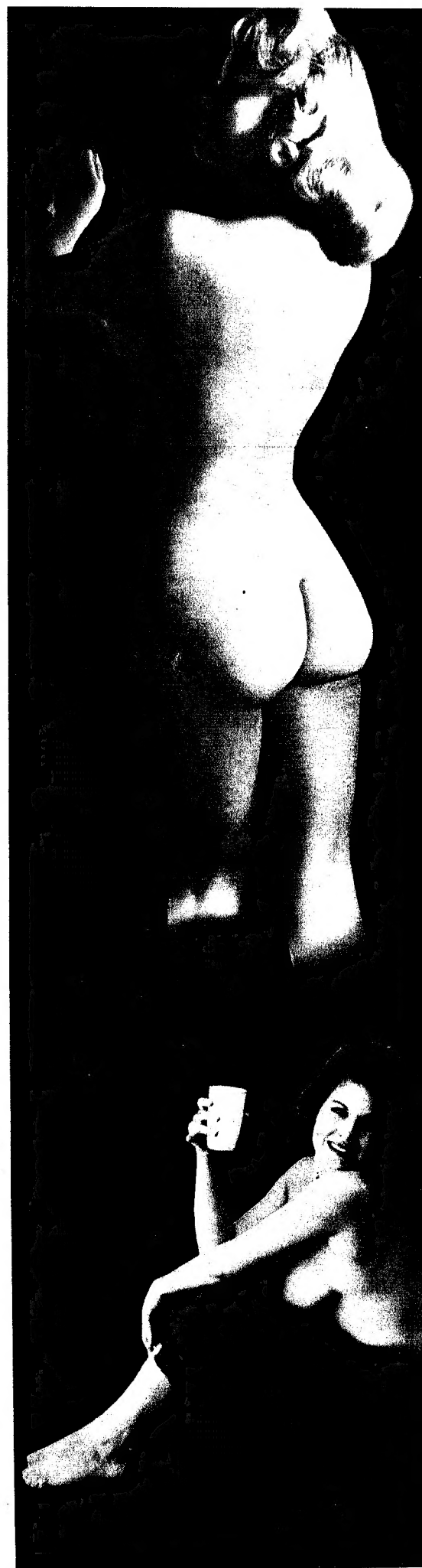
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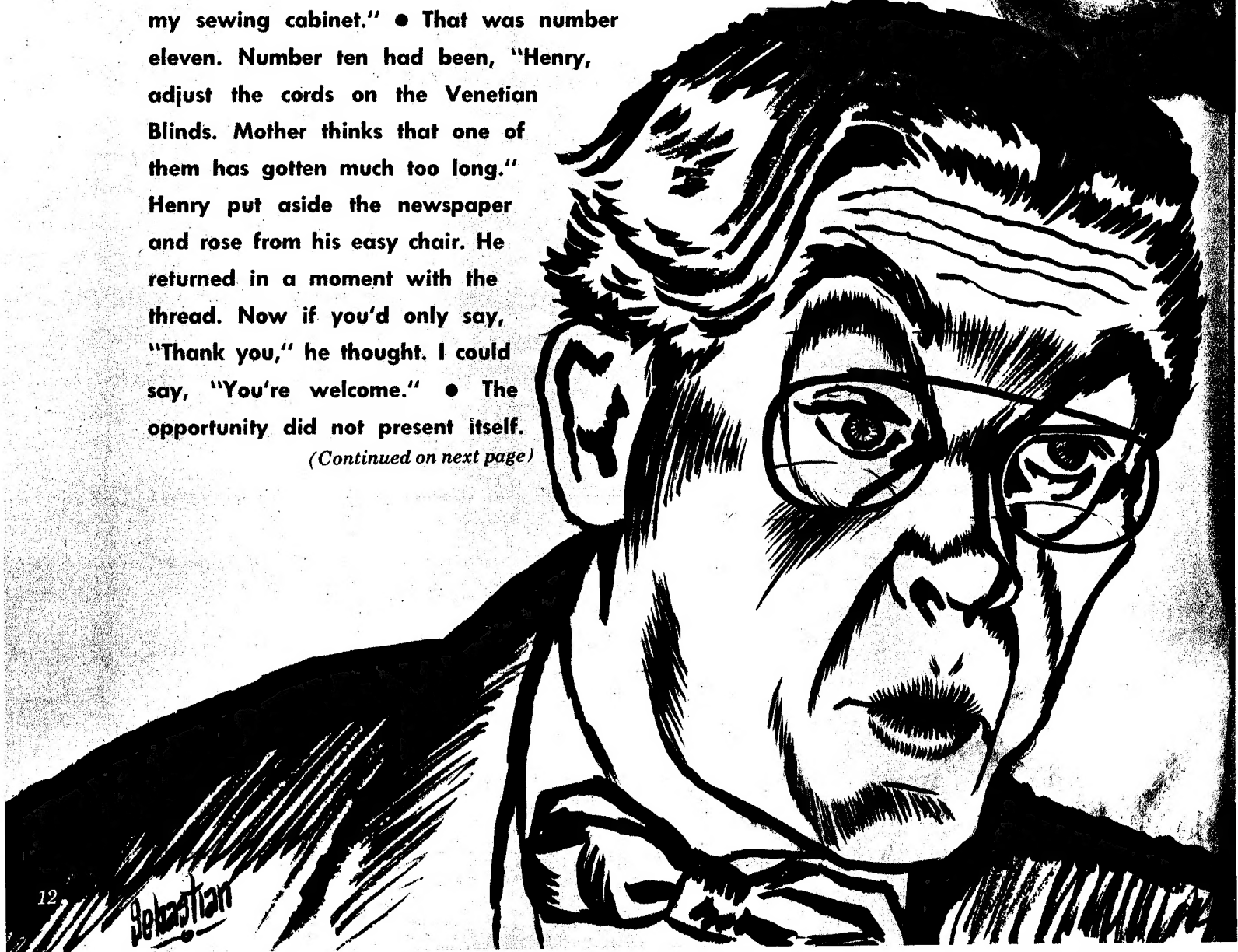
By JACK RITCHIE

It had taken a cataclysmic holocaust to free him from the hen-pecked order of his existence . . . surely it was worth another killing to keep him free!

THE Reckoning

This was the seventh evening Henry had been keeping a tally of the interruptions. • "Henry," his wife Agnes said. "Get me the brown thread. It's in my sewing cabinet." • That was number eleven. Number ten had been, "Henry, adjust the cords on the Venetian Blinds. Mother thinks that one of them has gotten much too long." Henry put aside the newspaper and rose from his easy chair. He returned in a moment with the thread. Now if you'd only say, "Thank you," he thought. I could say, "You're welcome." • The opportunity did not present itself.

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RECKONING

(Continued from page 13)

Henry sat down and picked up his newspaper.

"Henry, I'd like a glass of water. Be sure to run the tap so that it's cool."

Seven minutes since I got the thread, Henry thought. That was a nice long rest. For a woman with two perfectly good legs — sturdy, I might say — you certainly seem allergic to using them.

His wife's voice sharpened. "Henry, did you hear me?"

Henry got up.

Agnes looked up at her mother. "Would you like Henry to bring you anything from the kitchen?"

Henry's mother-in-law Martha did not take her eyes from the television set. "No."

Henry returned with the water and sat down. Eight minutes passed.

"I'd like some crackers and cheese," his mother-in-law said.

Henry had been expecting that. "Would you like some too, Agnes?"

"No. Not now."

Henry took the cheese out of the refrigerator. Perhaps it's a compulsion on their part. They simply can't stand seeing me do nothing. And trying to read the newspaper, of course, is nothing.

He brought the cheese and crackers back into the living room.

"Milk, too," his mother-in-law said.

How will I classify that? Henry wondered. As a full interruption or just a half? After all I hadn't sat down yet.

He brought the milk.

In his chair he glanced over his paper. They were both rather alike physically too—the same heavy build without actually being fat, the same

black and commanding eyes. And that permanent imperious frown — as though they suspected that he harbored thoughts of rebellion and they were ready to pounce on the faintest manifestation of it.

"I'll have cheese and crackers now," Agnes said.

That was fifteen. Or was it only fourteen and a half. He hadn't made up his mind about his mother-in-law's glass of milk.

He brought back crackers, cheese, and a glass of milk.

"I didn't ask for milk," Agnes said.

"Sorry, dear." He drank the milk himself.

Behind his paper he kept his eyes on his watch. They didn't beat him or starve him, but they simply regarded any attempt on his part to take a free breath as treason.

Six minutes, seven, eight, nine. Don't tell me, she's not going to. . .

"Henry," Agnes said. "I've changed my mind. I'll have that glass of milk."

At eleven o'clock, after the news and weather report, Henry's mother-in-law turned off the television set. "I think it's time we all went to bed."

That, of course, was an order and Agnes relayed it to the private. "Henry, it's time to go to bed."

Henry was almost asleep when his wife nudged him "Get me some aspirins."

He felt the familiar fury. As far as she knows, I'm asleep. But that doesn't stop her from waking me and having me get out of bed to get her aspirins.

And then he remembered. This was number twenty-eight for the evening. A new record. He felt almost elated as he went into the bathroom.

The next morning Henry arrived at the office at ten minutes to eight. Miss Wilma Tragar, the office superintendent, was already there and her eyes went to the wall clock.

Henry quickly checked too. Yes. It was ten to eight. He hadn't been late. As a matter of fact he had never been late. Twenty-two years with Swenson & Swenson, and twenty of those under the supervision of Wilma Tragar, and he had never been late.

He hung up his coat and went to his desk. Someday I'll purposely come one whole minute after eight, he thought peevishly. Just what would Wilma do about it anyway?

At eleven-thirty, Wilma brought the Wilson file. "There's an error in here."

Henry experienced his usual tension. "Yes, Miss Tragar?"

"Ten cents," Wilma said.

Why did she always come to him?

He knew positively that at least four other clerks worked on that file just as much as he, but she immediately assumed that any error must be his.

"Ten cents?" he asked. "Are you sure it isn't nine or eleven?"

Her dark eyes fixed on him. "I said ten."

Henry flushed. "I didn't mean to be insubor . . . I mean, if it's an even ten, I think I know where to look for the error. You see Evans has the habit of sometimes making his five's look like sixes in his original vouchers and so if I know it's an even ten this time . . ." Henry realized that he was sweating. "You see the error is in the one and not the zero . . . so to speak. I mean I'll probably find that in the second column . . ."

Her face was cold and expressionless. "Stop your babbling and get to work."

Henry sorted the vouchers, putting those with Evans' handwriting to one side.

Why does a dog chase a cat? Henry thought ruefully. Because the cat runs. And yes. I run.

At twelve, the office emptied for the lunch hour, but Wilma Tragar remained at her desk.

Henry sighed and kept on working.

At twelve fifteen he found the error and it had been as he suspected. He took the file to Wilma Tragar with a feeling of triumph.

She glanced at the voucher he showed her and then looked up. Henry had the feeling that he was looking at Agnes or her mother.

"Are you positive you found the error?" Wilma asked dryly. "Or did you adjust the figures so that you could go out to lunch?"

Henry reddened. "No, Miss Tragar. I found the error. Really, I did."

She smiled faintly. "Very well. Take the file down to the vault."

Henry went down the flight of stairs to the sub-basement. She could have asked the office boy to do that when he came back from lunch, he thought bitterly.

The two story building had originally been a bank and the vault was a massive affair much too large for the needs of Swenson & Swenson, and so the company used it only as a file storage room. The door was open, as it always was. Closing and opening the vault was too complicated a business to bother with.

Henry entered the vault and found the proper filing cabinet. He had just closed the drawer when he felt the floor shudder under him.

An earthquake? He wondered with a flash of surprise. But no that could-

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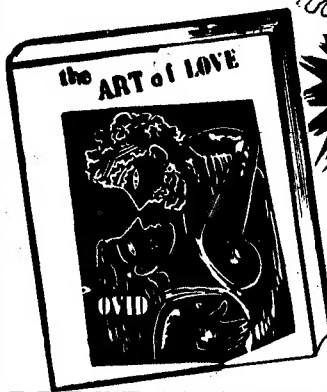
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RECKONING

(Continued from page 14)

n't be. Not here.

It was pitch black when Henry finally opened his eyes. He groaned and touched the back of his head. Gingerly he explored the source of the pain and decided that at least he hadn't fractured his skull.

He fumbled in his pocket for a book of matches and struck one of them. The vault was a shambles of filing cabinets and scattered drawers.

The match went out and Henry rose painfully to his feet. His limbs ached, but again, as far as he could determine, nothing was broken.

Henry lit another match and climbed over the cabinets to get to the vault door. When he stepped through, he found that except for the fifteen feet immediately in front of him, the way ahead was an impassable mass of brick and stone rubble.

The match burned his fingers and Henry dropped it. He turned around in the darkness and discovered a slot of daylight high to his left. It was only a few inches in width, but Henry's spirits lifted. At least he would not suffocate.

Henry realized with surprise that he wasn't frightened. He hadn't panicked.

He worked his way as close to the finger of light as he could. "Hello," he shouted. "I'm down here."

There was no answer and Henry shouted again. He was pleased by the calmness of his voice.

He shouted a dozen times more without result.

Henry lit another match and found a place to sit. The sensible thing to do is wait, he told himself. They'll get to me soon. It's just a matter of time.

But uneasiness began to gnaw at him.

Why were there no sounds outside?

There should be fire engines, rescue trucks, the sounds of men searching the ruin. Voices, at least.

He glanced at the radium dial of his watch. It was after six. He had been unconscious all afternoon. Perhaps everyone had gone. They had stopped searching.

Henry came to a decision. If there was no one out there to help him, he would have to help himself.

Carefully he began moving the obstacles between him and the tiny square of light. He moved each piece of rubble gingerly, trying to make certain that he would not dislodge a torrent of debris that might bury him.

He stopped every five minutes to shout, but still there was no answer to his calls.

The light from the small hole faded and Henry labored blindly in the dark. At nine, the moon rose, and Henry once again could make out the opening.

It was close to ten o'clock when Henry at last reached the hole and cautiously began to enlarge it. When it was just large enough to crawl through, he squirmed out and got to his feet.

He gasped. As far as the eye could see in every direction there was nothing but ruin. Hundreds of fires licked at the sky.

Henry picked his way slowly through the mounds of debris. It was difficult to tell where the streets had been. Occasionally he shouted, but without much hope of hearing an answer.

It began to rain and Henry found shelter by crouching under a sheet of corrugated iron leaning against the remains of a wall.

As he huddled there he became aware of his hunger and thirst. There was nothing he could do about the hunger, but he cupped his hands and held them under the water pouring in streams from the roof of his shelter. He drank until his thirst was quenched and then sat in the half-darkness watching the rain. The drumming on the piece of iron was somehow soothing. Henry yawned and made himself as comfortable as he could.

He awoke soon after sunrise. The rain had stopped and most of the fires were out, but here and there a wispy plume of smoke still drifted upward. The sun was shining, but the air was thick with dust.

Henry's eyes went to the devastation on the suburban hills where his home had been. Agnes and her mother must be gone too. Just like everyone else.

Henry walked until he found the ruins of what had apparently been a

supermarket. Fire had not touched it and Henry began digging into the rubble.

He found a can of peaches and grinned. One of the first things he would have to do was find a can opener. He was going to have a lot of use for it. But for the time being, he used a shard of metal to open the can.

After he had eaten, Henry decided to make his way to the highest point in sight. He reached the hill in an hour and from there he could see miles in every direction.

The same desolation reigned everywhere. Even the fields beyond the city were gray. As far as Henry could see, there wasn't a bit of green anywhere.

Henry looked at his watch. Ten minutes to eight. This was one morning he wasn't going to have to face the eyes of Wilma Tragar.

He realized that what had happened had been more than an earthquake. Much more. And whatever it had been had affected a tremendous area. Perhaps the entire world.

Henry was again pleased at his reaction to the disaster. No fear, no panic, no depression at the loneliness. Actually, he felt remarkably free and light-headed.

Almost regretfully, he decided that he would have to begin looking for survivors of the catastrophe.

He sat down and took his notebook and pen out of his pocket. He began making a list of the things he would need if he had to journey far.

Henry found that he was enjoying himself.

It took him a week of leisurely searching the ruins to equip himself. But now he had a pack, a bedroll, and enough compact food to last him for ten days if he found nothing else as he conducted his search.

Henry traveled slowly, almost sight-seeing, and in two months covered less than a hundred miles. He found almost nothing but ruin and dust. Here and there, perhaps a clump of grass had miraculously escaped the blast, or on the side of a cliff, ivy still fought to live.

He found himself getting tanned and lean. He had little trouble feeding himself and he learned that it was best to travel along rivers to assure his water supply.

The dust in the air settled gradually and the days were bright with sun and the nights clear. At the end of the third month Henry noticed that the green was coming back into the world.

A rabbit bounded far ahead of him one day; on another he saw a fox. And that night he heard a cricket for the first time.

He began making a list of the things

that were still alive in the world.

Only occasionally did he feel the absence of human company and then he thought in terms of man-talk before a bonfire, or a chess game, or perhaps a few rubbers of bridge.

Henry did not miss Agnes at all. And after the first few days he ceased to think of her entirely.

At the approach of fall, Henry selected a salvageable building in the center of a medium-sized city and set about making it livable for the winter. He repaired a small cart and every day he scavenged in the ruins, stockpiling canned foods and supplies for the cold months ahead.

The first flakes of snow appeared in November. By that time he already had more than enough for his winter needs, but searching in the ruins had become an engrossing habit. He enjoyed finding things that were more luxury than necessity.

As he pushed his cart he watched a flight of mallards. That brought to twenty-three the list of living animals and birds he had seen so far.

He turned his cart into a lane he had not explored before and parked it when the rubble prevented him from going farther. He took his rifle along as he climbed the debris ahead. Yesterday he had seen a huge wild dog and the animal had appeared dangerous.

He wandered about for a half an hour then suddenly stopped and gaped at the dust at his feet.

Had he been this way before? Could these footprints be his?

He placed his foot beside one of them. They were the same size, yet . . . His heart leaped suddenly. The marks of hobnails. Henry had no pair of boots with hobnails.

His excitement rose. The prints were new and sharp. Whoever he was, he couldn't be far away.

Henry quickly scrambled up a hill of broken stone and his eyes eagerly searched the ruins ahead.

The man was less than two hundred yards away. He wore a mackinaw and was approximately Henry's own height. He was carrying a rifle and picking his way slowly through the rubble away from Henry.

Henry was about to shout, but then something . . . something he couldn't quite explain to himself made him hesitate.

Henry sank down behind the fragment of a wall and watched warily.

The man turned and began coming back towards Henry. He came within one-hundred yards, fifty, twenty, but still Henry hesitated to make himself known.

And then Henry's eyes widened. It was a woman!

She was large and big-shouldered, and her eyes were black and cold. For a wild moment of panic, Henry thought that she might be Agnes . . . or Wilma Tragar. But no. He had never seen her before.

She looked directly at Henry's hiding place and he held his breath. For the first time since the blast, Henry was afraid. He remained absolutely still.

She stopped ten yards away from his hiding place for perhaps a half a minute and Henry was sure she had seen him. But then she turned and moved away.

Henry exhaled with relief. He watched her going away and suddenly another danger appeared.

If she turned left at the end of the rubble choked lane she would discover his cart.

Breathless, he watched and prayed. "To the right," he whispered fiercely. "To the right."

At the end of the lane, she stopped for a moment, apparently undecided.

And then she turned left.

Henry cursed weakly and waited for the inevitable.

Her eyes narrowed as she approached the cart and then she looked at the ground. She stared at Henry's footsteps and then she looked in his direction.

Henry's palms were damp with perspiration.

She came toward him slowly, almost as though she were stalking game. And she smiled thinly.

Henry closed his eyes. No. He couldn't go back to all that again. Not after the freedom he had tasted.

Later, when Henry reached his house, he looked back at the sky. He would have to remember to add another name to his list of living things.

This was the first time he had seen vultures.

He watched them circle slowly and descend on the body.

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